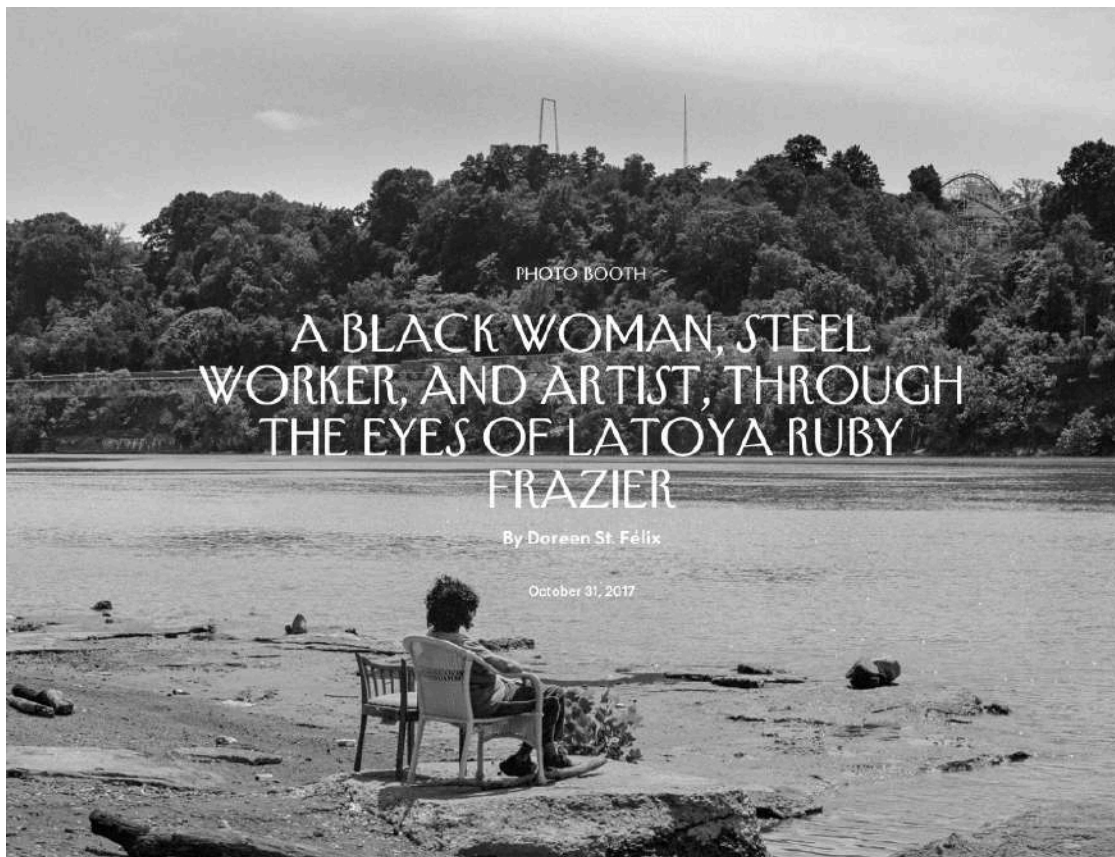


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Doreen St. Félix, "A Black Women, Steel Worker, and Artist, Through the Eyes of LaToya Ruby Frazier," *The New Yorker*, October 31, 2017

THE NEW YORKER



Sandra Gould Ford sitting on the Bank of the Monongahela River, in Braddock, Pennsylvania. Courtesy LaToya Ruby Frazier / Gavin Brown's Enterprise

The photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier can capture the decline of an entire economy, the vulnerable cycles of American industry, within a single human face. Like the documentarians Dorothea Lange and Gordon Parks before her, she scales down social upheaval to the intimate, modest scale of portraiture. It is the long shadow of the Rust Belt steel boom that especially compels her; she is a black child of Braddock, a “financially distressed municipality” of

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Pittsburgh, according to the Pennsylvania government, where Andrew Carnegie and the barons of metal had once established monopolies on that dangerous, alchemical work. Frazier was born in 1982, and when she was growing up the steel mills of Pittsburgh were closing down, and jobs were going overseas. Residents moved toward work. In 1920, at the industry's peak, Braddock's population topped twenty thousand; by 1990, it was down to forty-six hundred. Frazier remained—for her family, she had to remain—and devoted her photographic practice to tracking the fragile endurance of her “ghost-town” home town. She has called the camera the key to her, and her community's, survival. She approaches her subject “not as a curious or concerned outsider but as a vulnerable insider.”

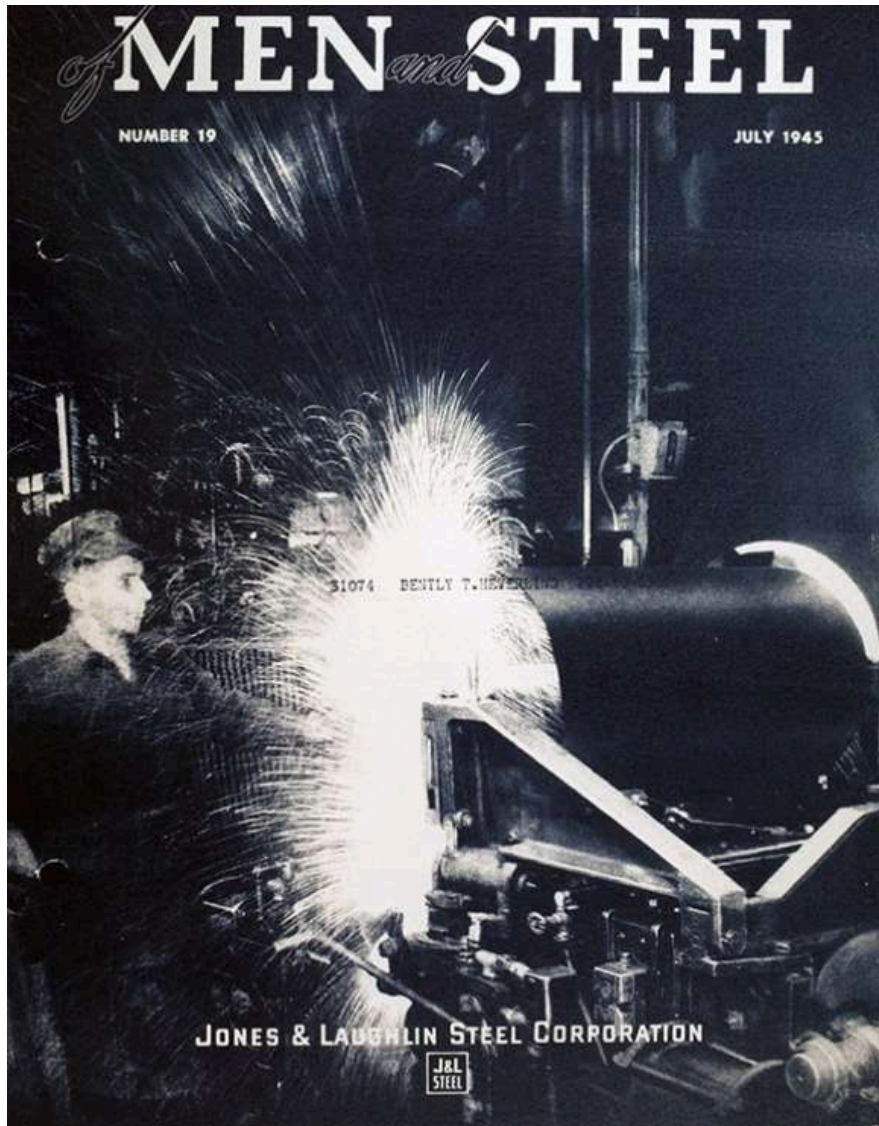
In 2015, the same year she was awarded a MacArthur “genius” grant, Frazier met Sandra Gould Ford, another insider, at a conference in Pittsburgh. In an e-mail correspondence, Frazier told me that she felt an instant affinity for Ford, who is an artist, photographer, teacher, and writer. Frazier learned that Ford had been a secretary and clerk at Jones & Laughlin Steel Company, a competitor of Edgar Thomson Steel Works, where Frazier's step-grandfather had worked. There were other synchronicities—both had lived in Pittsburgh's Talbot Towers housing project in the eighties, when Frazier was a newborn and Ford was a newlywed, Frazier told me. Ford occupied a part of Frazier's mind for two years, until the two women reconnected this past summer and began an artistic collaboration. The result is “On the Making of Steel Genesis: Sandra Gould Ford,” a joint series, currently on view at the August Wilson Center, in Pittsburgh, that forges a record of Pittsburgh's black working-class life from Ford's excerpted photographs and Frazier's humane storytelling.



*Sandra Gould Ford, in her office in
Homewood, Pennsylvania, 2017.*

Courtesy LaToya Ruby Frazier / Gavin Brown's
Enterprise

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Sandra Gould Ford's copy of the July, 1945, issue of "Men and Steel," Jones & Laughlin's magazine for employees and shareholders. Cyanotype print.

Courtesy LaToya Ruby Frazier / Gavin Brown's Enterprise

Frazier's portraits of Ford give the sprawling show its center. Once she began photographing Ford, Frazier told me, "it was difficult for me to stop." "We were inseparable. I'd arrive at her house in Homewood, PA around 10 am and spend the entire day until 10pm or 11 pm." Through Frazier's lens, Ford is conveyed as a woman full of grace, humor, and memory. She smiles, but just barely, cradling a hard hat in her home office, her jacket emblazoned with a Jones & Laughlin insignia. From a distance, Frazier finds Ford sitting on the bank of the Monongahela River, a

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body of water that had been corrupted by the once-blasting furnaces and mines. In another, Ford inspects old J. & L. meters, choked by overgrown brush. Frazier's deferential vantage point gives the impression that she is following Ford, physically and spiritually. Theirs is not the conventional dynamic of artist and muse; both photographer and subject are black women at work.

Frazier, the portraitist, sometimes suspends us in the sky. As her aerial photographs scan Pittsburgh's changing grid, Ford supplies the exhibit's history. A self-appointed archivist, Ford did lay anthropology work following J. & L.'s closure, "documenting the human traces on the factory infrastructure." Frazier wrote to me. She collected original copies of company grievance records and fatal-accident reports, and hundreds of documents pertaining to the closing of the mill. At J. & L., photography was forbidden, but Ford took pictures anyway, at covert angles. "Goodby Mice + Rats," is scratched into one wall in a photo taken right after the complex shut down; "Pensions Please" is etched into another.



Sandra Gould Ford looking at the view from her former Talbot Towers apartment, in Braddock, Pennsylvania, 2017.

Workplaces create special cultures, and the disappearance of industry can see those cultures reduced or obliterated. Frazier chose to make cyanotypes of Ford's documents, turning them a chemical dark blue. This emphasis on process, I think, reminds the viewer that art, too, is a synthetic labor, an accumulation of intentions, of access, and of time. In a sense, the re-making of Ford's J. & L. paraphernalia acts as oblique portraiture of a community of workers, of the unknown and the dead. Frazier, who does not mince words when it comes to her moral instincts, told me that the exhibit is intended as a memorial. The artist-archivist, invested in the virtues of both occupations, is a public figure the country needs.